



THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

Helping You Manage Your Company's Most Valuable Resource — Employees

Call EAS: Olympia (360) 753-3260 Seattle (206) 281-6315 Spokane (509) 482-3686

Website: <http://hr.dop.wa.gov/eas.html>

■ Q. Although I am drug-free today, I have a drug-using past. I know what a drug dealer looks like. My employee matches the description perfectly. Aren't I obligated to confront him, perhaps subtly? After all, I have special knowledge about these things.

A. Your drug-using past does not obligate or entitle you to confront an employee you think could be a drug dealer. Such a confrontation, even with a subtle approach, could lead to a severe response toward you and your organization. Focus on job performance as a way of managing this employee as you would any other. You undoubtedly take pride in winning out over your past drug use, but, like any other supervisor, approaching your employee without justification based on job performance issues can only cause unwanted problems. Your employee is not likely to validate your suspicion and will feel harassed with your approach. Also be careful not to discuss your opinion with others who could later attest to unfounded accusations about this employee.

■ Q. A few of my employees made offensive comments about the ethnic backgrounds of other employees. I stepped in quickly to confront and stop this behavior. It happened only once. Should I make an EAS referral? They need diversity awareness training, right?

A. Your employees demonstrated intolerant and disrespectful behavior. Such conduct is unacceptable in any organization and your intervention was absolutely appropriate. Not all one-time occurrences of unacceptable behavior in the workplace indicate the need for a supervisor referral, but it may be helpful to discuss the incident with an EA Professional as well as your own HR Consultant. Such behavior must not be repeated, and it is important to document that you did everything possible to prevent a recurrence. Employers risk vicarious liability for discriminatory and harassing behavior of employees when they are aware of it and fail to act. So, you did the right thing. Disrespectful behavior has wide-ranging effects for employee victims and the entire organization. EAS may suggest an educational intervention or further assessment, depending on the circumstances. EAS will consider other personal problems that could add to the risk of the behavior's recurrence.

■ Q. Is EAS successful or unsuccessful if an employee is terminated for not improving his or her performance after a supervisor referral to the program?

A. Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), such as EAS, benefit employees by helping them resolve personal problems that may affect job performance. In this sense, success or lack of success belongs to the employee and his or her decision to take full advantage of what EAS has to offer. Salvaging employees and helping them remain happy, healthy, and productive is the goal of your referral. The success of EAS is measured by its usefulness to an organization in helping manage troubled employees and behavioral risks. Some employees referred to EAS will decide not to change their problematic behavior even though EAS provided appropriate opportunities. Other employees may be unable to change in spite of their desire. EAPs are aimed at early intervention and support of an individual's ability to function productively as a member of the workforce.

■ Q. I can't counsel my employees, but is there something appropriate that I can do to help them manage their stress better, particularly if they are not individually inclined to visit EAS?

A. There is a role for you to play, but it is linked to legitimate supervisory concerns. Do you see that your employees take the rest breaks to which they are entitled? Do you encourage line supervisors under your supervision not to interfere with such breaks? Do you take breaks yourself and model work-life balance? Doing so will help your employees feel it is okay to do the same. Ask your employees what you can do to help them manage work stress better. You may be surprised at the good suggestions they will make. Be sure to ask individual employees how they are doing during stressful times. A show of empathy goes a long way toward helping employees feel appreciated and will help them keep a balanced perspective when the going gets tough.

■ Q. I denied my employee's written request for some expensive office equipment. She has since demonstrated a hostile attitude toward me. Denying her request was appropriate and my prerogative, so why such a reaction?

A. Your employee's response to the denial of her request demonstrates her emotional reaction to it, but it is not possible to say what underlies her response. All of us are subject to management's decisions, and one tough lesson to learn is to avoid taking such denials personally. If things normally go well at work, most employees are able to put management decisions we don't agree with in perspective so we can remain focused on our jobs. Some employees do not cope with rejection well. For some, rejection causes shame, and indignation may be the natural response. Such an employee may be convinced you have targeted him or her for unfair treatment. Explaining your rationale for the denial, rather than having her imagine what it might be, can open communication, demonstrate respect, and reduce the risk of an adverse reaction. Consider an EAS referral if change isn't forthcoming.

NOTES:

Visit EAS on our website at:
<http://hr.dop.wa.gov/eas.html>

